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Caste and Politics in Contemporary West Bengal: An Inductive Study of Select Panchayats in Purba Bardhaman

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Synopsis: Ph.D. Thesis

Caste and Politics in Contemporary West Bengal: An Inductive Study of Select Panchayats in Purba Bardhaman.

Toushali Raina

Introduction: No discussion on democracy, justice, equality, development, liberty, or any other area of Indian politics is complete without shedding light on caste. Caste often influences the electoral outcome, voting behavior, and party affiliation or alliances. Caste has interacted with and embedded itself in religious, linguistic, regional, and ethnic variations. While caste was being reconstructed and remolded in Northern, Western, or Southern parts of India, West Bengal remained mysteriously out of the discussion of caste and politics. West Bengal's politics was defined by discussions on democratization, development, and institutional or organized state politics, and in the process, caste was made irrelevant or invisible. While there was a discourse being formulated on the stunning transformation of Northern India with the rise of lower-caste politicians, West Bengal's polity remained captured by the Upper Caste. Historically, political parties in West Bengal distanced themselves from caste-based mobilization, at least publicly. The political discourse in West Bengal placed the state as an exceptional caste-less polity, with the Bhadraloks at the center stage of politics. The dominance of party society and class as a unit of political mobilization renderedall other identities obsolete. However, in the last decade, caste has emerged as a topic of discussion in the academic field, and other castes like Namashudra and Rajbangsi are gaining prominence in politics; it is being considered that caste is gaining prominence in political rhetoric to a certain degree.

In the context of the ascendance of identity politics in West Bengal, this study explores the role of caste in consolidating identities at the grassroots level of rural areas. Through conducting an inductive study in select panchayats of Purba Bardhaman district, this study tries to map the broader themes of the interaction of caste and politics in West Bengal.

In particular, this study examines how political forces interact with caste at the grassroots level in the Purba Bardhaman district through an inductive study consisting of ethnographic work. An inductive study can be an efficient way to conduct this research. It allows the generation of insights directly from the field, grounded in the operation of political parties and lived

experiences of people. As mentioned earlier, while the existing literature provides a historical and theoretical understanding of macro-level state politics, there is a gap in understanding how those dynamics play out in specific contexts. By employing an inductive methodology, this study seeks to uncover the nuances of caste politics that may be overlooked in macro-level analyses. As grassroots political institutions, Panchayats serve as critical arenas where caste and politics intersect. Studying these spaces reveals how caste shapes access to resources, decision-making processes, and political representation.

Research Objective and Methodology:

When we think of politics in West Bengal, the names that come to mind are all Upper Caste. This argument extends to the public socio-cultural domain as well. All the notable names in a cultural domain are Upper Caste. In this context, it needs to be studied how this dominance and politics of exclusion are being politically mediated at the grassroot level of politics, especially now, with the apparent ascendance of caste identity in politics. Even with the ascendance of Namashudras and Rajbansi or Mahishyas in West Bengal politics, the Upper Caste dominates the popular political imagination. However, Bauri, Bagdi, and Dom castes are rarely discussed in West Bengal politics. They are not included in the widespread public political discourse and are almost alien to a large section of the West Bengali cultural milieu. In this context, this study explores how Scheduled Castes other than Namashudra, Rajbansis, or Mahishyas interact with politics in regions other than South 24 Parganas, Nadia, or the Northern region of West Bengal, where caste politics interplay has been studied to a significant extent.

This study aims to understand the impact of caste on politics in contemporary West Bengal - whether and to what extent everyday social processes like spatial practices are influenced by caste, how these processes are politically mediated, how caste is articulated or invisibilized for mobilization and electoral support by political parties, how the operations of political parties are negotiated by people belonging to Scheduled Caste and how caste is accommodated or excluded as a factor in the decision-making process at the grass-roots level of governance. In particular, this study examines how political forces interact with caste at the grassroots level in the Purba Bardhaman district through an inductive study consisting of ethnographic work. An inductive study can be an efficient way to conduct this research. It allows the generation of insights directly from the field, grounded in the operation of political parties and lived experiences of people. As mentioned earlier, while the existing literature provides a historical and theoretical understanding of macro-level state politics, there is a gap in understanding how those dynamics play out in specific contexts. By employing an inductive methodology, this study seeks to uncover the nuances of caste politics that may be overlooked

in macro-level analyses. As grassroots political institutions, Panchayats serve as critical arenas where caste and politics intersect. Studying these spaces reveals how caste shapes access to resources, decision-making processes, and political representation. The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted in six villages in the Purba Bardhaman district. These villages reflect the complexities of caste relations, from dominant caste groups to marginalized communities, allowing for examining power dynamics across different levels of the social hierarchy. While studies on caste and politics in West Bengal have focused on the Namashudras primarily residing in the districts of South 24 Parganas and Nadia and Rajbansis residing mainly in North West Bengal, the middle part of West Bengal is relatively under-researched. With a considerable population of the second largest caste group in the state – Bauris and Bagdis, Purba Bardhaman is a viable option. Before the division between the two East and West Bardhaman districts, SCs constituted 27.4% of the population in Bardhaman district. The villages with a mixed population and a significant, if not majority, SC population were selected for the study. These villages fall under three gram panchayats (henceforth GP). When the ethnography was conducted, one GP was headed by a SC Pradhan, one by an Upper Caste Pradhan, and one by a Muslim Pradhan. Employing ethnographic methodology, I gathered primary data through formal and informal interviews, surveys, and extensive participant observation (observing electoral campaigns, speeches, and rallies). Two hundred fifty villagers, three-gram panchayat pradhans, and 65 political workers from the above mentioned parties were interviewed. The survey was conducted for about a period of 10 months, including the period of the 2021 legislative election.

The document analysis method was employed to understand the position of caste in political parties' electoral and party agendas. To assess political parties' orientation towards caste, election manifestos, press statements, and other political documents, such as state and central committee conference reports, political mouthpieces, and vision documents for CPI(M), AITC, and BJP, were analyzed. For the data on the social composition of village-level party workers, I visited the party offices and collected the names of party members. Then, I verified their caste identity with other party members. Though this method has limitations, a similar method has been used in previous studies on caste politics in India. Christophe Jaffrelot (2009), who used this methodology in his work on the social profile of elected representatives of various states, used this methodology. Other authors who have worked on similar issues, such as Jasmine Zerinini (2009), Cyril Robin (2009), and Ghanshyam Shah (2009), have followed almost the same method of either asking directly the concerned person about his/her caste identity or asking informed persons and party cadres and local people. These ethnographic works suggest that this is the only workable method of identifying caste identities. However, it also points to the limitation of data recorded by the official bodies where such information is not automatically

available. Booth-level election data was collected from local party offices and the election commission website.

Framework of the Thesis: The thesis is divided into six chapters. Each chapter tries to understand the intricate tapestry of caste in social and political life at the grassroot level through examining the ideological orientation of political parties regarding caste, spatial production and negotiation, local governance, and elections. The study seeks to understand whether political parties leverage caste to mobilize support, making it central to political strategies. Additionally, the study tries to map spatial production and practices that change or perpetuate existing social relations of hierarchy in everyday life operationalized by political parties. Furthermore, the study tries to investigate the extent of influence of local governance institutions in resource allocation, development, and representation of the marginalized. The study then tries to map the intricaciesof caste and everyday politics onto the heightened complexities of caste and politics during the election period. Finally, it tries to understand the nuanced nature of the politicization of caste contextualized in the theoretical framework of Populism.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Caste and Politics in West Bengal: A Trajectory of Uneven Prominence

Existing literature on caste and politics in West Bengal mainly focuses on the historical exclusion of caste questions from post-colonial West Bengal politics. In the absence of plebianization of politics, underscored by the rise of lower caste politicians and political rhetorics of caste, West Bengal's political institutions remained dominated by the Upper Caste, creating a perception of West Bengal as an exceptional state in the country. In West Bengal, caste was less prominent in political discourse due to a historical trajectory of first, *Bhadralok* dominance in Politics (Bhattacharyya, 2005; Chatterjee, 1997), second, partition and subsequent demographic change in the population distribution of SC groups (Chatterjee, 1997, 2012;Bandyopadhyay, 2011)., third, political mobilization along refugee identity and finally the dominance of party society during Left front era (1977-2011) where unit of mobilization was caste and under party society all other forms of identity were rendered irrelevant (Bhattacharyya 2011). Scheduled Castes like Namashudras and Rajbangshis initiated social movements against upper-caste subjugation, but these movements diminished as national freedom movements emerged (Bandyopadhyay 2011; Basu 2003). Since then, West Bengal has not witnessed consolidated caste movements. However, with the rise of the Trinamool Congress and recent BJP activities(2014 onwards), caste questions have resurfaced in West Bengal politics (SinhaRoy 2016).

While research conducted at the micro level focuses on the impact of agrarian, land, and political reformon caste structures (Rudd 2016), the relationship of organized political forces with traditional systems like caste and how that shapes the political culture of that specific

place have been relatively under-researched. The notable exceptions are Banerjee (2014) and Roy (2012), both of which try to understand the political culture of voting in India and the interaction between caste and politics in West Bengal through a series of village studies.

However, with the rise of the BJP in the state, the complexities of partisan politics have heightened. The main objective of this study is to understand how caste identities shape everyday politics and, in turn, are shaped by organized political forces at the grassroots level in this new setup of tripartite political competition. This study aims to understand the impact of caste on politics in contemporary West Bengal - whether and to what extent everyday social processes like spatial practices are influenced by caste, how these processes are politically mediated, how caste is articulated or invisibilized for mobilization and electoral support by political parties, how the operations of political parties are negotiated by people belonging to Scheduled Caste and how caste is accommodated or excluded as a factor in the decision-making process at the grass-roots level of governance.

Chapter 2: Locating Caste in Party Documents: From Absence to Reconciliation

This chapter maps a shift in the documents from silence regarding caste to what can be termed 'reluctant inclusion' of the caste question. 2019 is a landmark year in which a significant shift can be observed in the political narrative on caste in the state. Prior to 2019, the political documents of all mainstream political parties showed a systematic negation of the caste question. Political documents, like conference reports or electoral manifestos of parties like CPI (M) and AITC, only superficially included caste in the pre-2019 era. However, the limited accommodation of castes in their agenda is couched in material terms, either in terms of economic upliftment or better access to welfare schemes. These seem to be the only benchmarks of inclusion of castes in politics that the parties consider relevant. The socio-cultural realities of the marginalization of these communities are not addressed or engaged with. Addressing the issuesof social discrimination and political inclusion does not seem to hold a significant place in the rhetoric of these parties. BJP, however, stood with a difference here. The party, in its political mouthpiece and manifestos, repeatedly has dealt with the caste question couched in their discourse of Hindutva.CPI(M) has understood caste couched in economic identity and, therefore, discarded the social, political, and cultural aspects of caste. AITC has addressed the aspects of honor, dignity, and pride in its manifestos and vision documents but fails to elaborate on them, making the inclusion of caste appear tokenistic. BJP has addressed caste but within Hindutva's narrative of the construction of the Muslim 'other.'

In the aftermath of the Lok Sabha election in 2019, the Trinamool Congress (AITC) has strategically engaged with various caste groups. For instance, the party has sought to consolidate support from the Matua community, a large group of Hindu refugees from

Bangladesh, by promising citizenship rights and addressing theirsocio-economic concerns. The party had promised to form Baagdi and Bauri development boards in the 2021 elections. In 2021, it launched a new scheme called Tofoshili Sanglap, whichis an outreach program for the SC population of West Bengal. This scheme aims to make the Scheduled Caste groups aware of the developmental program that AITC has to offer. At the same time, this scheme focuses on creating awareness among SC voters about the violencethat the BJP inflicts on Dalits elsewhere. This scheme also emphasizes the contradictions in the Citizenship Amendment Act that the BJP promised to implement. This issue is relevant for the Matua-Namashudras, for whom citizenship has been a long-standing demand. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has also focused on caste dynamics, aiming to attract Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Caste (SC) voters. The BJP's strategy includes promises of development and economic upliftment alongside broader Hindu nationalistappeals. This dual approach seeks to integrate backward castes within the broader Hindu consolidation. The 2021 state legislative assembly election's electoral agenda of the political parties and political rhetoric of the electoral campaign indicate a shift towards populism. While attending to the demands of the several castes, both these parties have accommodated the interests and demands of other social and religious identities. Populist politics necessitates the creation of 'other' against which a united struggle of the people can be conducted. AITC and BJP tried to create the 'other' and mobilize the 'people' in opposition. For AITC, the 'other' was BJP, which encapsulated a cultural and regional anomaly against the identity of 'West Bengali people.' For the BJP, it was a corrupt and religious 'other' that they tried to construct in AITC. These strategies underscore the versatility and potency of creating 'chains of equivalence' (Laclau and Mouffe 1986) in political identity formation and highlight the critical role of 'othering' in contemporary rightist politics.

Chapter 3: Mapping the Social onto the Political: Production of Space, Spatial Politics, and Caste

The prevalent argument for the apparent invisibility ofcaste in West Bengal politics is its alleged disappearance from social life. However, rural areas and their everyday life stand witness to various forms of caste-based practices, discrimination, and spatial segregation. While overt caste-based violence may be rare, systemic exploitation, oppression, and subtle forms of humiliation endure, manifesting in pronounced spatial segregation and implicit casteism. Notwithstanding significant socio-economic and cultural disparities between Upper and Scheduled castes, respondents, including political leaders, party workers, and villagers, frequently denied the caste system's presence, reflecting deep-rooted ideological denial.

One critical dimension of political mediation in the sample field was the production of counter

or third spaces. While ostensibly inclusive, the social spaces inside the villages are shaped by caste hierarchies and segregationist norms. For instance, temples (*mandirs*) and clubs are often designated exclusively for specific caste groups, with Scheduled Caste individuals barred from entering spaces deemed sacred or pure by dominant castes. This spatial exclusivity emerged as a normalized practice during the field study; however, disruptions—such as caste-based violence—challenged this status quo, engendering discontent. AITC has assumed that its function is to manage discontent among people. Spatial practices then become a site of discontent management negotiation and articulation. From the partisan interest, this can be understood as a purely strategic move to pacify a section of the population.The numerical strength and the assumption of a homogeneous voting pattern have made it animportant issue in the pre-election period. Through political mediation and negotiation, there are instances of the production of counter spaces. For example, there is a Manasa mandir for the Bauris and a club for the Bauris. The attempt at producing counter spaces by AITC exemplifies efforts to foster symbolic recognition of Scheduled caste identities. While these counter-spaces are often established under the promise of electoral support, their existence raises questions about whether they effectively challenge entrenched caste hierarchies or merely reinforce segregation under the guise of inclusivity.

Festivals, fairs as counter spaces, and political articulation: The Trinamool Congress (AITC) has created counter spaces in villages by strategically arranging and funding festivals and fairs specific to various caste groups. The financial support fosters a sense of recognition and inclusion among these groups. Moreover, these events provide opportunities for Scheduled Caste to experience freedom from the spatial constraints of untouchability that restrict their movements within villages. Under the Left Front regime, there was minimal intervention in such spatial practices, primarilydue to a strict adherence to a disciplinary code of behavior that dictated how party leaders andworkers, particularly from the CPI(M), should conduct themselves. These behavioral codes, which emphasized civility and propriety, implicitly upheld caste-based distinctions and restricted participation in certain activities deemed inappropriate or immoral. Consequently, participation in village fairs and festivals was limited, as these codes carried significant caste connotations. However, AITC has loosened these rigid behavioral codes, allowing greater access to spaces for Scheduled Caste. These spaces are produced through political mediation and, in the process, become sites of politics. The fair's arrangement includes multiple stakeholders, including the local leaders. The SC groups are involved in the various committees that arrange the festivals and fairs. While these initiatives have not entirely eradicated segregation practices in daily village life, they have provided Scheduled Caste groups with platforms to engage more fully in community activities. However, one must also note here that in the nameof subaltern culture, AITC has

been projecting Brahminical assumptions into the local culture of villages. Though fewer restrictions now exist, the cultural scenario in these festivals and fairs does not resemble or reflect West Bengal's rich folk culture.

Chapter 4: Institutions and Processes: Panchayati Raj, Caste and Politics

This chapter explores the interaction of caste and politics within the formal framework of political structures. Focusing on the local governance processes and the Panchayati Raj institution of the Gram Panchayat, it seeks to assess the processes of political mediation that shape everyday governance. The analysis delves into participation in local governance forums, including meetings and decision-making processes, and evaluates the performance of the Panchayat and its representatives in resource allocation. By examining these dynamics, the chapter aims to elucidate the interconnections between governance practices, caste hierarchies, and party politics, highlighting their embeddedness in the functioning of local governance institutions.

The chapter argues that the interaction of caste and politics is deeply embedded in the dynamics of local governance. While the Left Front implemented significant land reforms and introduced the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to deepen governance at the grassroots level, these measures failed to localize governance or fully address caste-based inequalities. Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) often supported the Left Front but were excluded from decision-making roles within both government and party structures. The caste question was deliberately sidelined, creating a political environment where Upper Caste dominance and caste invisibilization prevailed. Under the governance of AITC, a similar pattern is followed. Since decentralization is directed towards developing the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, and these communities deploy a ready unit of political mobilization, political parties try to portray themselves as service providers with assistance from bureaucracy. This bureaucratic-party nexus builds a loyalty network between the party and the beneficiaries, which can solidify an electoral support base. Further, the governance processes are utilized to foster the personal career of the organizational head of AITC in the local region. AITC has integrated a significant number of SC representatives in the operation of local governance at the gram panchayat level. Their inclusion remains symbolic mainly as they remain excluded from higher decision-making bodies of AITC, such as block committees. The exclusion of SC representatives in higher decision-making bodies is often rationalized through notions of meritocracy. This exclusion is compounded by heterogeneous hierarchy within Scheduled Caste, with the most marginalized Scheduled Castes like Dom, Hadi, and Muchi experiencing further exclusion and limited access to representation or resources. Ultimately, this chapter argues that while political mobilization has increased caste recognition in informal political domains, it has failed to translate into

substantial representation or empowerment in formal governance processes. This exclusion undermines democratic deepening and reinforces systemic inequities.

Chapter 5: Caste, Politics and Election: Emerging Trends in West Bengal

This chapter utilizes the 2021 state assembly election as a critical framework to understand the nuances of the political mobilization of caste during elections. Themes of the interplay of caste and politics through negotiation with political parties, production of spaces, spatial politics, and political articulation of caste through local governance processes discussed in the previous chapters are mapped onto the heightened political mobilization during elections. Political parties in West Bengal reject incorporating caste into politics uniformly because it does not concern them. They view caste as divisive and incompatible with the region's progressive culture. Leaders from various parties, such as CPI(M) and AITC, dismiss caste-based politics as antithetical to West Bengal's intellectual and secular ethos, fostering a paradoxical stance wherein society is deemed casteless yet hesitant towards caste inclusion.

This attitude negates the emancipatory potential inherent in inclusive politics, vital for addressing entrenched inequalities. Upper caste leaderspropagate a narrative of carelessness, masking persistent disparities while stigmatizing caste discourse as detrimental to liberal, secular values. However, there is a disjuncture between ideological orientation regarding caste and praxis. The chapter reveals that despite not being the main focus, caste permeated the electoral campaigns in the sample villages. CPI(M), AITC, and the 'no vote to BJP' platform extensively addressed caste atrocities in their critique against the BJP. This narrative gained prominence following the harrowing rape incident in *Hathras,* evoking concerns about Dalit women's safety. The incident of *Hathras* was mentioned many times by AITC during campaigns in the village. It reminded people about the dangers of electing the BJP to power in the state. CPI(M) and AITC attempted to construct a narrative against the perils of electing BJP. However, their efforts lacked the elucidation of the nuances of Hindutva and its anti-Dalit ideological orientation that fosters Brahmanical hegemony and punitive measures against Dalits. BJP disregarded any such allegations of exhibiting any anti-Dalit sentiment. In its campaigns in the villages, the party focused mainly on its contribution towards all the Hindus through its advertisement favoring the construction of Ram Mandir. Ram mandir was portrayed asthe unifying factor for the Hindus in BJP’s campaigns, attempting to overshadow the criticism against the *Hathras* incident. Assertion of one’s Dalit identity is rare in West Bengal Politics. However, during several campaigns, a Dalit woman candidate from AITC proudly flaunted her identity as a *Bauri* woman. Her focus onher caste identity can be seen as an attempt to consolidate identity as a mobilization unit and invoke support in favor of AITC

among the *Bauri* community. BJP workers allegedly attacked her, and she made a strong statement about it, reinforcing the narrative of BJP being an anti-woman, anti-democratic, and anti-Dalit political force. At the same time, many Brahmanical ritualistic practices were performed by the political parties that naturalized reverence for the upper caste groups. This can be seen as a measure tobalance the attention paid to issues of Scheduled Caste groups. The candidates were SC; political parties tried to increase their credibility in front of the upper caste population by emulating rituals specific to them.

Conclusion: It is argued that in the left-front era (1977-2011), caste remained subsumed within caste and did not surface in politics. The politics of CPI(M) mainly focused on the mobilization of class. Several economic reforms implemented during the Left Front era benefitted the Scheduled Caste by improving their economic status. However, the issue of social justice, which encompasses equal respect, recognition, and representation, has not been present in West Bengal politics. Politicization of caste refers to the concept of caste and politics interacting with each other and changing both. The interaction of caste and politics has often depended on access to power and socio-political resources, the assertion of identity, and change in hierarchical social relations. The belief that caste is a divisive tool of identity politics refrained the political parties from engaging with it at the macro and micro levels. This normalized caste discrimination and hierarchy, and over time, caste was relegated to the realm of personal space, manifesting itself in private choices like marriage. Additionally, the party society reinforced upper caste dominance in public-political life. Therefore, understanding caste politics interaction goes beyond the electoral assertion and political mobilization and movements of the lower castes. The implicit privileges enjoyed by the Upper Caste, which leaves the lower caste out of the opportunities, positions of power, representation, and socio-political resources, is also a 'politics of caste,' which was prevalent in the party society.

In the aftermath of the disintegration of party society and the ascendance of identity politics in the state, AITC brought the issue of recognition to the surface by catering to the interests of several Scheduled Caste. Coupled with the rhetoric of identity politics at the macro level, the party, at the micro level, has deployed several strategies like negotiating with the Scheduled Caste to engage in spatial politics, funding local folk artists, and launching several welfare schemes designated explicitly for the different castes. BJP has also brought the issue of recognition by appropriating different castes in the articulation of an overarching Hindu identity. However, the BJP did not depend solely on mobilizing Hindu identity to articulate the Scheduled Caste population. The issue of violence in Hathras and the subsequent anti-Dalit portrayal of the BJP were contested with the socio-economic situation of the SC here. With the issue of Ram Temple, the backlog of SC in government jobs, the unavailability of

SC certificates, and the inaccessibility of hostels and book grants were also emphasized by the BJP in its campaigns. Several developmental agendas were included in their electoral manifesto for the 2021 state assembly election. This endeavor by the BJP should be seen as part of their political agenda, which has witnessed a mix of identity and development agendas. The classification of a community is a political act embedded in the social processes of inclusion and exclusion, involving the allocation of privileges, rights, and disadvantages within an ideological framework. The people of the villages surveyed for the study were unfamiliar with the term 'Dalit.' They identify themselves with *'Tofoshili'*. Though the anti-caste movement and literature popularised the term Dalit in Marathi and Hindi-speaking regions, it did not have the same historical resonance or mobilization in West Bengali society. The historical and cultural distinctiveness of lower-caste communities in West Bengal, including the Namashudras andRajbangshis, have not always coincided with the more significant Dalit identity. The political notion of deprivation and marginalization that the term Dalit invokes in imagination is somehow lost in the more administrative term of 'Tofoshili.' The political parties in the initial phase (March-April) of the electoral campaign did not want to mobilize voters based on the Dalit identity as it was not a part of the discursive practices familiar to West Bengal. In the later phase of the election, all the political parties gradually used this term to mobilize the Scheduled Caste in their support. Identity politics demands a story about historic injustice and a future that alleviates it (Bhambra 2010). AITC's sporadic and reactionary usage of Dalit identity lacks grounding in historical injustice on Scheduled Caste. It positions caste violence as a cautionary tale against the BJP's potential accession to power rather than as part of a broader narrative of justice and emancipation. This reactive politics of AITC misses the opportunity to position Dalit identity as resistance to systemic inequalities. On the other hand, BJP ignites an imagination for the Scheduled Caste about a potential future in West Bengal where historical injustices imposed on Hindus will be met with justice. However, even in its attempt to forge a united identity of Hindu, BJP's politics sidelines the caste atrocities such as the incident of Hathras. This duality can be explained by the concept propounded by Ashutosh Varshney (2008) that the BJP does not want to address caste-based inequalities within the Hindu social order to dismantle systemic injustice; it wants to unify the caste groups for its political purpose.

There is a definite politicization of caste in micro-level politics. AITC has been able to highlight issues of recognition and increase share in local political power by restructuring spatial production and addressing spatial injustice in everyday life. The sub-caste groups have increased their bargaining power with political parties. These changes have broughtcaste into the periphery, if not the center of the political discourse of elections. This type of interaction has resulted in caste recognition in politics, an integral part of the politicization of castes. This

recognition manifests in various forms- Economic recognition is employed for the Scheduled Caste through several development initiatives and direct Cash transaction schemes. These cash transaction schemes recognize caste inequality and provide extra money for the Scheduled Caste. During the pandemic, the free rations and other basic amenities also helped the party foster a solid connection with the rural masses, among whom a majority are Scheduled Caste. Political recognition of social and religious identity: Political recognition manifests locally through the mediation of demands for the production of social spaces. Cultural recognition of Scheduled Caste: Funding various Scheduled Caste folk artists and producing a space to express their traditional cultural identity has ensured the various castes' recognition. The BJP's increasing vote share among Scheduled Caste groups threatened other political parties. This is another reason why AITC and CPI(M) were compelled to rethink their stand on caste and formulate a different approach towards the Scheduled Caste. The recognition of Hindu religious identity comes through practicing Hindu rituals and catering to the demands of building temples. AITC caters to demands/interests that emerge from multiple, intersectional identities of Dalits – as Dalits, poor, and Hindus. This probably answers why the BJP's mobilization of the Scheduled Caste remained unsuccessful in West Bengal.

The politicization of caste for other castes, like the Namshudras and the Rajbansis, can be understood through the demands channeled by their organizations and associations. In the absence of any such association for Bagdi, Bauri, Hadi, Muchi, and Dom, the process of politicization often depends on their interaction with organized politics. However, this interaction is often a two-way process. Organized political forces in West Bengal have also started to depend on these castes. With the dismissal of class-based politics from the state, AITC is left without a solid social base for dependence. AITC's post-bhadralok venture has enabled several castes/clans/communities to interact more openly with organized politics. However, their inclusion in politics and emergence is localized and limited. They have been unable to challenge the state's Upper Caste dominance. However, their interaction with organized politics and the subsequent political articulation of their interests and demands have resulted in a politics of localized assertion through negotiation. The idea of assertion is often understood through open resistance, social mobility, decision-making capacity, etc. However, repositioning oneself closely with power relations can also be a standard of empowerment. This repositioning of oneself is often achieved through negotiations based on contextual needs, which are intimate and have an everydayness attached to them. Production of a space designated to themselves was an exercise of empowerment in the local micro-level context for the Scheduled Caste in the sample villages.

The question remains whether this prominent interaction of caste and politics at the grassroot level has been able to restructure hierarchical social relations. Assertion of caste identity in

other regions of India revolved around several types of recognition. Dalit politics mainly depends on the issue of recognition, often expressed through an anti-caste political imagination. Without such anti-caste imagination, the interaction between caste and politics in West Bengal remains limited. Therefore, it can be argued that caste identity is politicized without a political engagement with caste dynamics. This study has observed that everyday life's functioning is still conditioned and shaped by hierarchical social relations. The *Babus* or the *Bhadraloks* have a hold over everyday life and spatial segregation continues. Additionally, in the political domain, AITC has made specific alterations to its grassroots-level leadership. There has been a slight change in the social composition of leadership in these villages, with more representation from marginalized caste groups. However, decision-making rests with the districtand block-level leadership, mostly Brahmins or Aaguri (intermediary caste). However, it has not been able to ensure a larger share in decision-making for the Scheduled Caste groups. All of these observations lead to the conclusion that caste and politics interact in the micro-level politics of West Bengal but do not challenge the hegemony of the upper castes.

The resistance to the hegemony of the Upper Caste in West Bengal necessitates a narrative of social justice foregrounded in anti-caste imagination. Additionally, any attempt to resist the Upper Caste dominance must also consider the cultural domain of Brahmanical Hindutva, which has become pervasive in West Bengal. Without organized efforts from the Scheduled Caste, the political intervention of the party is only reinforcing rather than dismantling systemic inequalities. However, without a transformative ideological narrative, any attempts to access power through negotiation or other strategies should be registered as a form of resistance, given the constrained nature of politics in West Bengal.

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